

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayishlach)

It was a blisteringly hot day, and the shade of the trees offered little respite for the forty prisoners of the Waldkommando (Forest brigade) whose job it was to cut down trees for lumber for the nearby Sobibor extermination camp. Today, environmentalists might rail and protest at the sight of these mighty trees being felled in the forest, but in 1943, killing trees was not even a sidebar as the lumber was meant to keep the fires going in the pits where the bodies of tens of thousands of Jews were being burned in the Sobibor death camps. No one was protesting that incredible loss of life either, in the summer of 1943.

Having spent the morning under the watchful eyes of their Ukrainian guards with no respite from the insufferable heat, the prisoners were finally given a break for bread and water. Two prisoners were sent down to the nearby river with buckets to draw water for the Jewish inmates.

It was July 20, 1943, and Josef Kopf and Shlomo Podchlebnik were given the buckets and sent off to the water detail. Nobody wanted this job, as it meant hauling water back to the work site during the only twenty minutes the prisoners were given a break, but unbeknownst to anyone the prisoners had maneuvered themselves onto this detail and had been waiting for the opportune moment to use it and escape.

Normally, two guards would go with the prisoners but for some reason that day only one guard accompanied them to the well.

Recognizing an opportunity that might never repeat itself, Kopf and Podchlebnik seized the moment to make a break for freedom. With small knives hidden in their boots they overpowered the guard and slit his throat and, taking his rifle and whatever valuables they found on him, ran into the forest and disappeared.

They survived for over a year by hiding with Polish farmers in or near the forest, whom they paid with valuables they had taken from Sobibor.

Tragically their escape had terrible consequences for the Jews remaining in Sobibor. The forty forest brigade prisoners were actually divided into two groups: twenty Polish prisoners and twenty Dutch. The Polish prisoners used the resulting confusion to attack their Ukrainian captors with their axes and knives; five actually managed to escape and survive the war. The Dutch prisoners, knowing they would not survive as foreigners in Poland if they attempted to escape, remained rooted to the spot. They were all executed immediately by firing squad.

The remaining Polish Jewish prisoners who were not killed initially, were captured and forced to crawl back to camp on their elbows and knees. There, the next day, after severe torture and

beatings, they were forced to choose an additional eleven prisoners who were executed alongside them. In a moment immortalized in the film 'Escape from Sobibor', the foreman of the Forest brigade, Podchlebnik's cousin, in a last defiant moment, raised his fist in the air crying out "Avenge us!"

The realization of what an escape would mean for the remaining inmates left behind on Sobibor was what actually motivated the prisoners to plan and execute, some two and a half months later, the largest single escape from a Nazi concentration camp. Knowing what would happen to any prisoners left behind the inmates who planned the escape decided they had to revolt in a way that would allow every inmate at Sobibor the chance to escape.

On October 14 1943, after overpowering some of the guards and killing some of the officers, over three hundred prisoners escaped into the forest; fifty three are known to have survived the war.

Meanwhile, Josef Kopf and Shlomo Podchlebnik the original two escapees, managed to hide for over a year, by moving from place to place occasionally hiding out with Polish farmers occasionally paying them with valuables they had smuggled out with them from Sobibor.

Tragically, two weeks after the Russians liberated the area they were in, thinking it was finally safe to return to his home town, Kopf found a Polish "friend" he had known from before the war. Intending to reclaim property he had hidden with the man for safekeeping, Kopf let his guard down. The Germans were gone, and he was home; after everything he had been through, two weeks after his liberation, Josef Kopf was shot in the back of the head and buried in a field.

Shlomo Podchlebnik survived the war but understood there was nothing left for him in Poland. So, he immigrated to the United States with nothing in his pocket save one valuable item he inexplicably managed to hang onto.

He became a successful businessman and community leader in New Jersey, marrying and raising one son, Charlie, who was completely ignorant of this story until his Bar Mitzvah when his father pulled an eighteen-carat pink gold chronograph watch out of his pocket and, placing it on his son's wrist, told the guests the story of his escape.

"That watch" he explained, "is the watch I took off the Ukrainian guard after we killed him; I have kept it all these years, and now I give it to you..."

Only years later, at the seventy fifth anniversary of the great escape from Sobibor, did Charlie finally start to think about that watch and how that Ukrainian guard must have come across it

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This week we read the portion of Vayishlach, when Yaakov, after escaping the house of the sinister Lavan, and surviving his encounter with Esau and his army of four hundred men, finally returns home to the land of Israel.

There is an intriguing detail the Torah shares with us, after Yaakov parts ways (reconciles?) with Esau:

“Then Yaakov journeyed to Sukkot and built himself a house, and for his livestock he made shelters (Sukkot), therefore he named the place Sukkot.” (Bereishit (Genesis) 33:16-17)

It is interesting to note that the verse has Yaakov journeying to Sukkot, despite the fact that it is only named Sukkot after he builds shelters for his animals. One might suggest the Torah is using the name knowing it will soon be called Sukkot, but it begs the question nonetheless.

Furthermore, one wonders why we need to know Yaakov built shelters for animals, never mind that he actually named the place after the animal barns; why not call it ‘#first home in Israel’?

It is worth noting that this detail in the story occurs after a curious dialogue between Yaakov and Esau before they part ways:

Esau initially does not want to accept Yaakov’s gifts saying (ibid. v.9):

I have much (*“yesh li **rav**”*).

Whereupon Yaakov responds: (ibid. v.11):

*“Take back my blessing; G-d has been good to me: I have everything (yeshi li **kol**”)*

How can Yaakov, even with all his flocks, say he has everything? He does not even have a home yet, and, having left the house of father-in-law Lavan will now have to provide for all his wives and children! Can anyone in this world truly say he has ‘everything’?

Interestingly, this is a term we have seen before: at the end of his life Hashem blesses Avraham with ‘everything’, (ibid. 27:33). Yet, this is after he has lost his beloved wife Sarah, so it is hard to imagine he has ‘everything’.

Unless of course, ‘everything’ is not what you *have*, it is rather who you *are*; it is less about what we physically have in the world, and perhaps more about how we spiritually and existentially view our world.

Yaakov has just spent twenty-two years in the world of Lavan, which was all about measuring a person’s worth by how big his flocks are, and then he confronts the world of Esau which measured a person’s power by the size of his army. (Esau is described as having an army of four hundred men, in a world that saw Avraham with his three hundred men defeat the known powers of civilization in what amounted to a World war).

It would have been easy to imagine Yaakov being deeply affected by all this and beginning to see the world, and even measure his own worth, in terms of the size of his flocks and the strength of his military prowess.

Perhaps that is why the Torah tells us he journeyed to Sukkot.

The Sukkah in the Torah is symbolic of the temporary nature of life. Indeed, it is specifically at the end of the harvest when the granaries are full and one might become a little too full of oneself, that the Torah commands us to leave our homes and spend a week in the Sukkah, the temporary booth, the better to remind ourselves of how temporary the 'things' we have in this world really are. Naming his first 'home' in Israel Sukkot might well be Yaakov's desire to never forget the promise he made when he went down to the house of Lavan so many years earlier:

"If G-d will be with me ..." less as a condition, and more as a promise to himself to remember the things that really matter in life

Why, for so many years, did Shlomo Podchlebnik keep that watch he took from the Ukrainian guard? And why was that his bar-mitzvah gift to his son so many years later?

Perhaps it symbolized the real value of learning to seize the moments in life, alongside a determination to remember every day, what a gift life is and how special and full of potential every day can be.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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